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Using Ockham's razor

Recently a young political scientist preparing a doctoral dissertation sent me a long questionnaire. He is polling scholars to determine first their "methodology," and second, how their "methodological models" have been altered by their experience. The questions were amusing — they resembled asking a dedicated seven-card stud poker player what bidding system he employed. However, I thought such diligence deserved a reply and indicated that, first, I drew my methodology from William of Ockham, and second, I considered "methodological paradigms" simple exercises in historical insight. He may have a problem feeding that into his computer!

Yet this is a very serious area of analysis, and I was not merely being perverse. William of Ockham, the 14th Century philosopher known as the "Invincible Doctor," formulated and sharpened "Ockham's Razor," the most valuable analytical instrument ever designed. When confronted with conflicting explanations of an event, said Ockham, always opt for the least complex, the one with the fewest vagrant variables.

To an Ockhamite, for example, all conspiracy theories are nonsense until proved otherwise. In dealing with abstract theories of international behavior, they always assume there is less there than meets the eye, and particularly the ear.

This came to mind as world leaders, attending Jomo Kenyatta's funeral, eulogized the "far-sighted African statesman." My question was, "What ever happened to Kenyatta, the Marxist-Leninist Mau Mau guerrilla leader?"

Yes, once upon a time Kenyatta, leading the struggle for Kenyan independence in the 1950s and early '60s, was billed as a stooge of Moscow. True, on two occasions he spent some time in Moscow and repeated the necessary Stalinist litanies to keep on the Comintern payroll. But in itself what did this prove except that the tough old black nationalist knew how to roll some white drunks?

Kenyatta had one obsession: He wanted to kick the British out of Kenya and run the place. Like the American revolutionaries, who delightedly accepted aid and comfort from absolutist, monarchical France and Spain, or Lenin, who was bankrolled by the German General Staff, he was prepared to take his breaks where he found them.

His regime was highly personal and he had a long memory. Why did he help the Israelis in their Entebbe raid? Had he been reading the Old Testament? Had he forgotten Israel's aid to Uganda, or the Israeli paratrooper's wings on Idi Amin's chest? Of course not: What he recalled was Lt. Idi Amin of the Royal African Rifles in his earlier incarnation as a great Mau Mau hunter. Kenyatta, in short, was an honorary Sicilian: "Revenge is a dish best eaten cold." And with superb aplomb he tucked it to the Ugandan butcher.

William of Ockham must be spinning in his grave, wondering why nobody's "methodological model" took into consideration Kenyatta's 50-year battle to restore his tribe, the Kikiyu, to their traditional primacy in Kenya. It seems not a sparrow falls these days without the intervention of Marxist-Leninism, when in fact you have a miscellaneous crew of gangsters seeking Moscow's protection.

A final example from the homeland of Marxist-Leninism. Shortly after World War II, a journalist friend asked a leading Polish communist, who had spent the 1930s in Moscow, why Stalin staged an abattoir of old Bolsheviks in 1936-37. The Great Purges had been explained on seven levels of high theory, but the Pole cut to the bone: "He had to destroy the witnesses — his 'History of the Soviet Communist Party' was in press." Stalin, who had been a flunky in Lenin's cadre but astronomically elaborated his role in the "Short History," just didn't want those knowledgeable punks around to — even verbally — review the work! Score another for the "Invincible Doctor."